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HEPHZIBAH:

A

CHRISTMAS STORY FOR CHILDREN.

BY

LUCY FIELD.



LONDON:

GRIFFITH AND FARRAN,
SUCCESSORS TO NEWBERRY AND HARRIS,
AT THE CORNER OF ST. PAUL'S CHURCHYARD.
M.DCCC.LXX.

250. c.

306.



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"She uttered a cry of joy."—Page 46.

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HEPHZIBAH:

A CHRISTMAS STORY FOR CHILDREN.

“WHAT a mite of a child to be sure!” said old Dolly to herself, as she tethered her goat under her mossy apple tree, and then stood looking across the common. It was a large, bare common, with nothing living in sight, except the “mite of a child,” and the people she followed. These people, a man and a woman, were approaching that way, and they were black and ragged and stern-looking enough; and stern and savage were the words and blows they bestowed on their starved-looking donkey, staggering along the white track of a road before them, and bearing across his back a bundle, of colour and size much like some dirty old sack. The child who had caused old Dolly’s remark, resembled the donkey in her half fed appearance. Her soiled and blood-

stained little feet twinkled wearily over the gravel in her effort to keep up with her companions, who took no notice whatever of her, nor of old Dolly who watched them from her cottage door ; but divided their attention between the donkey on whom their blows were bestowed, and the huge crust of bread and slice of bacon each of them devoured as they went.

Moved by the sight of the thin little labouring figure behind them, old Dolly ran as fast as she could to her cupboard and returned with a morsel of bread, which she flung to the poor little way-farer. Alas ! The child struggled on, afraid of being left behind, and conscious neither of the friendly face of old Dolly, nor of the effort she made to feed her. The bread lay untouched, till old Dolly, after seeing the group grow smaller and smaller, and finally disappear in the distance, went and picked it up, with a sigh, and returned in-doors to prepare her own humble meal.

The night was coming on wild and stormy, and very soon old Dolly fastened up her creaky door, to keep out the wind which rattled and whined for an entrance. It grew darker and darker, and the storm raged fiercer and fiercer, so that old Dolly was glad to creep to her poor little bed ; and drawing the patchwork counterpane and thin old blankets closer

round her, she shut her eyes and tried to go to sleep.

Old Dolly had lived all her life in this poor little hut, where her father and mother lived before her. She had played there as long ago as she could remember anything; and she never thought of being afraid of being all alone there, young or old, though any rough, strong man could have easily knocked down her cottage, walls and roof and all, and have buried her in its ruins. "No, no, it is not worth their while to take so much trouble for nothing," she would say to herself, with a smile, if any such notion ever did cross her brain. The wind and the rain, too, sounded often so strong and so fierce that one might easily have fancied they would soon put an end to the cottage and Dolly and all, when raging as they were doing on the night in our story. But Dolly said softly to herself, when the storm was loudest: "They are but God's servants; He has the wind and the rain in the hollow of his hand, and they wo'nt be sent to hurt a poor old body like me."

It will be seen by this that Dolly was not a wicked old woman, though she was very poor, and very ignorant too. Then, as she could not go to sleep, and as the window and door rattled, and the rain splashed down the chimney, she thought how her father and mother had died and been carried

away from that same very bed to be buried. Her father was a hard sort of man, and Dolly's thoughts did not rest long on him, but turned to her mother, a gentle, patient soul, who never said a cross word to any one in all her life. Thinking of her mother, somehow Dolly grew wider and wider awake; and lay staring at the dim, grey square of the little window, where a grey curtain hung, to keep out the sun when he came to shine on the world. The grey curtain waved in the draught, and as Dolly's eyes rested on it, she fancied she saw something moving outside.

This made her sit up in her bed, and stare at the window harder still than before. But her eyes were old and dim, and they grew so tired with trying to see, that presently she lay down with a weary sigh, and very nearly fell off to sleep,—thinking again of her mother; dead so long ago. Either sleeping or waking, she then fancied she heard a faint little voice crying, “Let me in;” and wider awake than before, she trembled a little, and asked herself: “Is mother come back?” But the grey square of the window now showed plainly even to her old and dim eyes, that a small figure was perched outside, whether the figure of her goat slipped from his tether, or of some other stray creature frightened by the storm, she was at a loss

to guess, till again a plaintive cry of "I want to come in," uttered in a thin, childish voice, settled the question. "Oh, gracious! it must be a child," old Dolly exclaimed, bestirring herself hurriedly to rise and open the little casement. In rushed the wind and the rain pell-mell, and the old woman shivered, as she strained her eyes to discern the owner of the voice.

A dark little heap lay, just slipped down, under the window,—and as neither sound nor motion replied to her question of "Who are you?" she stretched out her hands, and, grasping the wet bundle which lay there so still, with some difficulty succeeded in dragging it in over the low window sill. A child it was, sure enough, and a faint groan, as Dolly deposited it on the old hearth-rug, proved life to be still beating in that poor, shrunken, pale little starveling, though the eyes were closed, and the thin blue lips also, and the two wasted hands were rigid and stiff in their grasp of the tattered rags which scarcely deserved the name of clothes.

Here was a serious business for old Dolly. Few and scanty were the provisions at hand for fire, or food, or clothes. But the white little face did not fail to move her heart; and the fire was presently crackling on the hearth, the lost child, divested of its rags and of some of its dirt, sat there on the floor,

close before the kindling warmth, wrapped in the blanket from the old woman's bed, and propped up against the one chair which Dolly possessed. The closed eyes had opened for one wandering, puzzled look round the place; and then were again shut wearily, as fixed and still as before. But Dolly persevered without losing heart or hope; and at length, having made some tea from her own little precious store, she succeeded in inducing the parched lips to open for a draught; and she watched with immense delight the successful efforts to swallow, which ensued. The languid, drooping head was soon after raised, and the eyes fixed dreamily on the withered old kindly face which was stooping over her own.

The poor little soul was an eight or ten year old girl, and she had soft grey eyes, and a quantity of light, silky hair, now all dirty and draggled with rain, hanging in masses over her shoulders and neck. Dolly took the child from the ground, and seated her upon her own knees, as she gave her the rest of the hot, sugary tea she held in her hand. Scarcely was the last drop swallowed than the little one, who sat so contentedly to be fed, sank quietly back in the old woman's arms in a deep, refreshing sleep. Dolly laid her gently in the bed by her side, not shrinking, as a delicate lady

would have done, from the touch of the poor neglected child, but gathering her close in her arms. And so the two slept, till the morning sun, having driven away the wind and the rain, shone merrily in through the blind, and roused old Dolly once more, but the child slept on. The small room was tidied, and the fire once more lighted, and one or two cracked and ancient pieces of crockery set out on the rickety table, ready for breakfast, with a piece of a loaf and a little goat's milk.

Dolly took unusual pains to make everything cheery and bright that morning, casting from time to time, as she bustled about, earnest glances at the bed, where the white little face, surrounded with tangled hair, lay so very still. Sometimes she stooped to listen, with her ear quite close to the child's mouth, and when a gentle, soft, almost noiseless breath just touched her own furrowed face, its withered features shone with a quiet joy, and she set herself to work again. Her household matters done, the heap of rags she had hung up to dry when she took them off the child were carefully examined, but abandoned, even by Dolly's economy, as useless for the purpose of clothing or warmth. Out of her own slender stores she then hunted up one or two articles, which she proceeded to alter and mend, sitting down by the little window and fastening up

the grey curtain, saying to herself, "If the poor thing do wake, she must be hungry, surely," and so she let in the sunshine, which danced and sparkled across the brick floor, and threw the shadows of autumn leaves and the golden beams of its brightness over the bed and the sleeping face on the pillow. The child stirred and smiled, and murmured some plaintive sounds, but did not wake; and old Dolly, watching her till she subsided into motionless sleep again, turned once more to her task.

Thus hours and hours went by. Outside, on the common, flocks of geese came gabbling across the green, and nibbling cattle cropped the sweetest grass. Nannie, the goat, was untethered, and she, too, wandered away, butting with her head at the children who wanted to play with her, as they themselves loitered on the way to school. Now and then a cart creaked and rumbled past the cottage door, and still more rarely a carriage flashed by and away in the distance, with burnished harness gleaming bright on the well-groomed horse. None of these noises did the sleeping child seem to hear, till all at once she started up with a scream which made Dolly drop her work, and spring to her feet. The child sat up in the bed, straining her eyes to some distant object, as she cried out as if in an agony of fear, "They're coming, I see

them; oh, don't let 'em take me, oh, don't!" And she drew the bed clothes over herself, and lay trembling beneath them, till the bed shook with her terror. Speechless with amazement at this sudden outburst, Dolly glanced from the bed to the window and back to the bed, without finding a word to say in reply. Far away, on the edge of the common, her old eyes could just discern a slowly moving mass, but she could not make out of what it consisted at all. So she drew the bed clothes gently away, and asked, "Who are you feared of my dear?" caressing the poor little trembler, as she spoke. "Of Joe and of Meg. There they are, and if they find me out, they will beat me so hard. Please, oh, please, ma'am, hide me away." This was said first with outstretched hand, pointing to the dark object approaching from afar, and the passionate outcry finished with hands clasped and raised to old Dolly in earnest prayer.

"Was you the child who went by here last night with a man and a woman and a donkey; and you running behind to keep up?" Dolly asked, as sundry vague imaginations of having seen the child before, became clearer to her mind. "Yes, I always have to run to keep up, and oh, my feet's so sore. Don't let them find me, please, don't." Dolly's heart ached at these repeated outcries of prayer,

and terror and distress. "But aren't they your father and mother, my lamb?" old Dolly tenderly inquired, smoothing back the child's hair as she spoke, and looking straight into a pair of blue-grey eyes, large and limpid and serious, which gazed back as steadfastly up in her own. "No, oh, no, they're not," cried the child, "Meg isn't mother to me, she took me away to beg for her; and she says I'm her child, but I aint."

Dolly looked and listened and believed without doubting, as she met the gaze of those eyes. "Lie still, poor little dear," she said, smoothing the bed into order, as she spoke. "They shan't find you out, if I can help it." And she hung up her cloak for a screen between the bed and the door; and putting the child's rags out of sight, resumed her place and her work, murmuring to herself, "Where there's little enough for one, there'll be less for two,—and where will I find anything to cover the child from the cold? And I so old too, what if I die and leave her alone? I fear I'm too venturesome in this." She looked out across the common, as these thoughts passed through her mind. Sure enough the child's eyes were not mistaken. On came the same group she had watched the evening before; and the man swore terrible oaths, loud enough to reach Dolly's ears, and he and the

woman showered blows on the donkey and abuse on each other,—all just the same as before, only now no poor little figure limped in painful haste behind them, unable in her sad speed to see even the morsel of food flung her by Dolly's friendly hand. "If God clothes the grass of the field, shall he not also clothe you, oh, ye of little faith?" The old woman knew these words, and they came to her now in her perplexity and doubt; and after that she doubted no more, but took her stand on the step of her door, which stood always open, so that the thought of shutting it never entered her mind. Indeed she would have considered such a proceeding so unnatural as to be certain to attract the attention she wished to avoid.

"P'raps that old witch has seen her?" quoth Joe to the woman, as his eyes encountered Dolly, standing on the threshold, and sewing as she stood. Meg followed up the audible hint by asking aloud, "Ha've seen ere a child what has strayed and got lost, eh, missis?" Feigning by a sudden impulse to be deaf, old Dolly responded only with a nod, and a good day to the ill-looking tramps. But Joe approaching his mouth to her ear shouted his question louder, making one poor little heart beat faster and faster in the small dark room within.

"Lots of children, ay, lots to be sure," answered

Dolly, surprised at her own quick invention, and maintaining as stolid an air of indifference as she knew how to assume. Joe swore more frightfully than ever, and Meg took up the discourse. "We've missed a slip of a lassie," she shouted into old Dolly's ear. "No great loss, to be sure, but she'll grow to be worth her victuals, and is sharp enough too. We took her for pity, you see, neighbour: for Joe and me haint none of our own. Now when we come this way about Christmas time, we'll give a trifle to any as has found and kep' the child. Do you hear?"

Dolly nodded affirmatively, but maintained a prudent silence; and as Joe, thundering out that no good would come of talking to that deaf old fool, impatiently drove his donkey onward, Meg wound up her speech, saying at the top of her voice, "She's sure to be near, and ye'll hear of her if she turns up. So tell the folks as keep her we'll be back for her come Christmas, d'ye hear?"

Again Dolly nodded in silence; and as the woman hastened after the man, she stood, quite transfixed by an adventure to her so desperate and unexpected, and followed the retreating group with wide-open, anxious eyes.

When they were too far for her sight to distinguish their figures from the gorse on the common, and the

gabbling geese by the pools, she turned with a sigh, a little overwhelmed by all that had so suddenly occurred ; and her startled glance fell on the child, scantily covered by the old bed-quilt, standing in the middle of the floor, her bare feet, and tangled locks, and wild, staring looks, making her poor wasted figure even more pitiable than before.

Old Dolly's wits were quite bewildered, and too scared for speech ; she looked down on this strange and forlorn little being, as if some ghost had risen at her feet. But the child speedily broke the silence ; for, throwing her arms round her protectress, she burst into passionate words of gratitude and delight, uttered amidst equally passionate sobbings, till Dolly found herself hugging the little thing in her arms, and trying to soothe her with such tender words as probably she had never used in all her life before ; but they were words which fell on eager ears and a thirsting heart, and, nestling closer and closer, the sobs quieted down, and at last the tears too ceased.

Dolly held her still clasped to her, as she asked, " What is your name, my poor dear ? "

The child looked up and around, and then, pointing in the direction taken by Joe and Meg, she said, in a frightened tone, " *They* called me Bet, but that is not my name."

" What is it, then ? " Dolly repeated, gently ; but

the child looked bewildered, and leaned her head against Dolly's shoulder, and spoke at last in a dreamy, confused sort of way.

"It's a long name as mother called me at home. Hepsy, they called me, but that aint the name quite right. It's in the big book though," she added, suddenly raising herself and pointing to the large old Bible, Dolly's sole library, which lay on a shelf, as the child's keen eyes had discovered.

"Ah, well!" answered Dolly, in a tone of relief, "I am glad they named thee out of that book, for I hope thou'lt be a good child, as is fit for one with a Bible name. And now come thy way, and wrap thyself up while I give thee a morsel to eat. It's not Christian-like, to be sure, to sit to thy food all uncovered like that; but a bit you must eat, for I see you are more bones and skin than aught else; and then wash thyself clean, and make this rough head of thine smooth, and put on these things that I've sewed up in some sort of cobble, till better can be done; and you must learn to help me and yourself, as I don't doubt but you'll try." For answer, the child seized the withered old hand, which held up the newly-prepared clothes to her view; and she caressed it, fondly, lingeringly, as if she knew not how enough to express her sense of well-being and love, till Dolly ended the scene, but without any touch of harshness,

by lifting the child to her chair, and rolling the blanket well round her as she made her take some bread, and gave her a good draught of milk.

Dolly soon found she was not mistaken in her faith that the foundling would try and do her part. The quickness of the child surprised her even more than her love and devotion, and eager goodwill. These last qualities Dolly knew more about; for God had bestowed them on her, poor old soul as she was; and they had furnished the only brightness and joy her life ever knew. But Dolly herself was slow. As child, as maiden, as well as in feeble age, she never had won any race, nor performed any task by reason of quickness or skill; but had succeeded by painstaking only. So she wondered, and never ceased to wonder to see this "slip of a child" get through so much of the work of the day so quickly and well; or to find how she learnt, almost without being taught, every useful thing her old friend could show her the way to do.

The autumn leaves hung on the tree by the hut, when the child was received into its sheltering warmth, and they still clung to the rustling boughs when already the order of things within the hut was quite changed. For now old Dolly could often sit down and rest, or as she more often chose to do, she could earn a little more money by

mending and sewing and knitting for the farmers' wives who knew her: and even for a few of the people in the town. It took a long time for her to go to the town, for it was five whole miles from the common, so far, indeed, that the light of its lamps in the sky shone over the gorse and the silent pools, just like a great distant fire, when the sun was set, and the night was dark. So Dolly could not often go there;—and as for the child, she was afraid;—and so was Dolly too. For now she had learnt to love the little one so dearly that even the child herself could hardly dread the re-appearance of Joe and of Meg more than the old woman did.

By some unspoken feeling between them, they neither of them talked of these fears. Only now and then the child, remembering Meg's parting words, would ask fearfully and in a whispered tone: "How long before Christmas comes, Granny?" Granny was the name by which old Dolly desired to be called; while she adopted for the child's, her own designation of "Hepsy," which the clergyman, when he called to see her, told her must mean to be "Hephzibah." He was a kind as well as a learned man, and he heard with interest all that Dolly had to tell of the child. Nay, his eyes glistened with tender compassion, when the old woman told of Hepsy's sufferings while with Joe and Meg, and more especially

when he saw how the little thing clung in terror and fondness to her protectress as the tale concluded with the threat of those wild and savage people, that they would be back at Christmas, and would find and take her away.

He laid his hand on the trembling Hephzibah and bade her take courage,—and trust in God who had already given her a good friend and a home, and who would raise up other help, if only she put her faith in Him. The child gazed up in the face of the clergyman in fixed attention, and it seemed to her he spoke of some long forgotten, but once often repeated lesson. The little upward-turned countenance seemed to the good clergyman one which promised obedience to his teaching, and as he took his leave, he again laid a gentle hand on the child, and said to her, smilingly: “Remember this, little one, that name of yours, ‘Hephzibah,’ means ‘my delight is in her’; do you understand?” Hepsy nodded and smiled in most intelligent affirmative. “Then you must mind and deserve your name and its meaning, my dear, and try to be the delight of One who is Father to us all, and then you will be the delight of your good old friend as well.”

So saying, he went away over the common, while Hephzibah watched him in silent thought till she saw old Dolly going with her bucket to the spring.

Then Hepsy sprang before her and filled it, and carried it in, smiling over her shoulder at Dolly who followed remonstrating "Nay, nay, child, Parson never meant you to do what is too hard for your years; and it's a'most too much for me, with that heavy old bucket; and you're such a slip of a child."

"Ay, but I am strong," answered Hepsy, "and look how fat my arms are growing with all your good food, Granny, dear!" and she jumped on the chair by Dolly's side that she might reach up to give her a hug.

So went by the autumn days, and the storms of the equinox came, with cold nights, and sometimes days so cold that they were fain to shut the door of the hut for warmth,—and then Hephzibah took longer journeys round about from the shelter of Dolly's roof that she might collect a good store of wood for their winter use; but she never forgot to keep a sharp look out on every side, lest the group of figures she most dreaded to see should come upon her unawares. One night the wind was so high that it was a very long time before either the old woman or the child could sleep. At length the frequent question from Hepsy of "Are you asleep, Granny?" was repeated no more, and listening to her regular breathing, old Dolly, too, soon closed her eyes.

Against all habit and custom, Hepsy's slumber was soon broken, and she who almost invariably lay fast locked in sleep from first shutting her eyes till Dolly called her in the morning, now abruptly started up in bed, wide awake, and staring at the darkness. Also she felt herself trembling and shivering. Had some horrible dream wakened her? She did not know. But she resisted, not it must be owned, without a struggle, the temptation of waking Dolly, and listening to the roar of the wind, she sat and strained every sense to catch she knew not what sight or sound. Suddenly a noise in the hut almost made her scream in her terror. But she was a brave little soul, and she restrained the cry, and said to herself, "What is it? and what is it like?" Well, it was a fluttering, and a rustling, and a scratching kind of noise; and Hepsy could not guess its cause.

But instinctively she felt that it was no sound of any human sort;—and it had never occurred to Hepsy to think about or be afraid of ghosts. Now, however, when, at intervals, the same fluttering, and rustling began again, she recalled all the stories of ghosts which she had ever heard; and shivering more than ever as she realized the near presence of something mysterious, and therefore awful, she could control herself no longer, but hung over Dolly, and whispered in her ear: "Oh, Granny, dear,

listen,—there is something in the room.” Dolly was alert and awake in a moment, and presently the strange sounds recommenced. “I’ll strike a light and see, child,” she said; “don’t tremble and shake like that. It won’t harm us whatsoever it be; —so lie down while I look about.”

But this was more than Hepsy could muster courage for; and she followed, holding Dolly fast, while she groped for a light; — and a terrible start it gave her when the match flashed over the floor and walls and ceiling, making every familiar object quiver and wave to and fro. But the candle soon cast a steady beam through the narrow dwelling, each feature of which showed exactly its usual appearance; not an article was moved or altered one atom, nor was anything strange to be anywhere discovered,—though Dolly carefully examined the whole. The noise had ceased as the light was kindled, but just as the old woman was declaring it to be fancy only, and when she was about to extinguish her candle, once more the scratching and fluttering recommenced so very close to them both that it was not only Hepsy who started and gave a tremulous look all round. Then, however, her young eyes caught sight of something white in the chimney, and the sight was so reassuring that she boldly ran closer still, and cried out in

great excitement: "Here it is,—and it is a bonny bird."

Out of the chimney, all grimed with soot, old Dolly immediately drew a poor terrified pigeon, and it must be confessed that she felt at first very small pity for the intruder who had thus rudely broken their sleep. But seeing how Hepsy hung in tender commiseration over it, as she held it in the gentlest of grasps, Dolly's kind heart relented, and she waited patiently, all cold as she was, while Hepsy wiped away the worst of the dirt, and on the suggestion of Dolly, bestowed the poor pigeon safely in an old covered basket, which done, they again crept to bed,—though the noise of the restless bird, and the cold, and the storm which still raged outside, kept them long awake; and made Hephzibah creep, unrepulsed, quite close into Dolly's arms, where she fell asleep, after murmuring in a voice that seemed like music to the good old soul, "You took me in, Granny, and now another poor thing is come to you, because you're so kind." After which speech of the child, there was no doubt about letting the pigeon remain in peace, and it became the delight of Hepsy, as she truly was Dolly's delight.

Under the pigeon's wing, when Hepsy's little fingers cleaned the white plumage next day, she

found a paper tied, and on it were written these words: "Expect us on the 12th." Hepsy pondered much on this wonderful discovery; and old Dolly told her that this, no doubt, was a "carrier-pigeon." Thereupon Hepsy asked a very great number of questions, some of which Dolly could answer, and many more she could not. But at any rate Hepsy made out that the pigeon was sent on a message, and that the paper she found under its wing was intended to tell some one that some one else was expected on the 12th of that month, which was the month of October, and now she knew it was the 3rd;—and as Hepsy had some very good brains in her little head, under all its bright mass of hair, she could easily see that in nine more days the time would come which was named in the note. And more than this, her conscience told her that it would be very right to let the carrier-pigeon fly off with its message, instead of keeping it there. But it had bruised itself in the chimney, or in the storm outside, and Hepsy persuaded herself for some days that the pigeon must be nursed. And so effectually did she nurse it, and pet it, that the bird was seldom many minutes off her shoulder. She carefully kept the door and window shut, when the pigeon was out of its basket; and her intense pleasure in it reconciled the old woman to so untidy an inmate. But

all the while, Hepsy, though she did not say a word, was tormented at the thought that the pigeon ought to carry the message, and that she ought, for this purpose, to let it go free. Of this Dolly never thought, being herself slow to put this and that together.

At last, when five days out of the nine were gone, and the pigeon had no wounds at all left for an excuse, and all its white feathers shone burnished and splendid like a robe of white satin, Hepsy's self-accusations became more than she could bear. So she said to old Dolly: "The bird is not really mine, Granny, is it?" Dolly looked from her needle at the child, who stood leaning on her knee, and then she looked at the pretty silvery bird which sat on Hepsy's shoulder, and pecked at her little ear, as it peeped from amongst the gold of her hair. As the old woman did not immediately reply, Hepsy, in her eagerness, repeated her question, and her eyes dwelt eagerly on the closed lips of old Dolly, and on her serious, but always kindly eyes: "No, sure;" answered Dolly at length. "You're right eno' my lass, the pigeon is none of ours; but what then?"

Hepsy's eyes filled, but she bravely answered: "Only I thought perhaps it should be set loose to carry the paper."

"Expect us on the 12th," old Dolly read out

thoughtfully, for the twentieth time at least, as Hepsy held the said paper before her. "And this is the 8th," continued she, in the same meditative tone, and there she paused, and looked full in the eyes of the child, where the tears were glistening still. Hepsy read that look quite as easily as she would have understood the plainest speech. She knew Dolly agreed with her conscience, but that she could not bear to grieve her by putting this into words.

So the child turned away, and went out at the door of the hut, after pausing a minute while she tied the paper in its old place under the wing of the pigeon. Her favorite fluttered as the fresh air outside blew round her, and then took a little flight, in a circle above the child's head, but only to return to its perch on Hephzibah's shoulder.

Dolly had followed, and stood on the threshold watching. "How am I to make it go, Granny?" she asked sadly, and Dolly took the pigeon gently in her hand and flung it high in the air. This time the bird started off in right earnest. It flew round in circle after circle, ever higher and higher, and then away sped its silvery wings, away, away into the far blue sky, till at last even Hepsy's eyes could distinguish its form no more. That was a mournful evening in the cottage on the common;—yet, the

child felt, and she wondered at herself for it, that she did not wish she had kept the bird. Her heart, indeed, ached, but her conscience tormented her no more.

Hepsy had now learnt to sew both quickly and well, and she helped to add, in this and various other small ways, to Dolly's slender means.

On the evening of the pigeon's departure she and the old woman had long been sitting quite close to the one dim candle, which the shortening autumn days rendered necessary long before bed-time. Their needles flew fast, but they were very silent. Once or twice Dolly, who was little skilled in caresses, smoothed down the bright wavy hair of the child with a touch so tender that Hepsy had much ado to keep back her tears. At last her self-command suddenly gave way. She threw down her sewing, sprang impetuously on to Dolly's knee, and, throwing her arms round her neck, laid her head on the kind old woman's shoulder, and burst into tears.

"My poor lamb!" said Dolly, soothingly. "Thou hast but few pleasures; and now this one is gone, poor little lass."

"Oh, not that!" answered Hepsy, in panting eagerness. "I have so many, many pleasures, Granny. Don't say they are few."

Dolly kissed her, and held her quietly without saying more.

“Granny!” the child began again, when after a long time her sobs had worn themselves out, “Do you think, Granny, that I have a mother alive?”

Dolly gazed in silent astonishment in the tear-stained face, now raised up eagerly towards her own. The electric kind of fashion in which Hepsy’s young brain worked, very often made Dolly, as she said to herself, feel quite dazed, and as if her head turned round. Seeing her old friend’s puzzled look, Hepsy went on with increasing animation. “Because *I* think that mother *is* alive; and since you have been so kind and so very, very good to me, Granny, it makes me remember mother. I never thought of anything but my sore feet, and the cold, and being hungry; till I came to you,—but now I seem to remember mother.”

“And I thought you were crying only for the pigeon!” exclaimed Dolly, with a naïve expression of surprise at her own stupidity, and of genuine sympathy with Hepsy; together with a tender pride in her darling’s good heart and cleverness. “And so *I was*. I was crying for the pigeon, Granny, and for mother, and with joy and thankfulness to you,” Hepsy burst out, almost relapsing into tears in her sense of the inadequacy of speech. “Don’t you see, Granny? Can’t you cry for joy and sorrow all at once like that?”

Dolly's answering smile was very beautiful to see, though her old and wrinkled and weather-beaten face had never, even in her young days, been fair to look upon. The soul, pure and unselfish, looked out through the battered walls of its earthly home, and made the old face lovely, as the smile said plainly how tears were over with her long ago; but not her power of sympathy and of love. Just then a noise at the window arrested them suddenly; and as they listened breathlessly, it came again. Hepsy slid to the floor and opened the window in the twinkling of an eye. Both knew quite well, before their eyes confirmed it, that the pigeon was tapping against the glass outside. In an instant it was on Hepsy's shoulder, then in her arms, kissed, fondled, talked to in raptures by the little one, who seemed to struggle in vain to express half her delight.

Dolly closed the window; and, wiping her spectacles, sat down again to her work, scarcely less pleased, in truth, than the child herself, as she witnessed her darling's joy.

The note was still tied under the wing;—so again the pigeon had failed in its task. But Hepsy never thought of blaming it for this. She had no room for anything but satisfaction in her little heart just then.

Indeed, it was not till the 12th of October ac-

tually arrived that she remembered that the written message had never reached its proper destination at all.

The 12th was a lovely autumn day. Blue and still lay the arch of sky over the common ;—and as blue looked the still pools amongst their rough fringe of gorse and weeds. Hepsy went about her daily tasks with a preoccupied mind ; and the pigeon, now a prisoner no more, fluttered from roof to tree ; from Hepsy's shoulder, as she went to the spring, to the edge of the bucket, where delicately balanced on its slender feet, it dipped into the clear water, first its beak, and then its shining silvery head, while a fountain-like shower of diamond drops flew round, glittering in the sun, and Hepsy stood and watched.

"There comes a grand show, to be sure," Dolly called from the door of the hut : and Hepsy, following her eye, saw a splendid carriage, drawn by four light-stepping, fiery steeds, whose burnished harness sparkled till it dazzled the beholders. On it came, across the common, and the geese flocked gabbling away, as if offended at being so outshone, while the humble horses who browsed the scanty herbage, paused in their repast, and eyed their brilliant brothers with a meek and philosophic gaze.

As the equipage approached, Dolly and the child could distinguish a handsome lady and a fair young

girl, rather older, apparently, than Hepsy, who sat side by side within; and on the opposite seat a staid and grave woman servant.

Just as they were close upon the hut, the pigeon, startled by the noise of wheels, and clatter of hoofs, took refuge on Hepsy's shoulder. The young lady's eyes caught sight of the group thus formed, and starting to her feet, she cried out, so that Hepsy and Dolly both heard her words, "O Mama, Mama, there is my carrier-pigeon!"

The lady called to the coachman to stop; and the eyes of the three in the carriage, of the dignified coachman, and of the gorgeous servant behind, were all fixed on Hepsy, as, blushing crimson, she nevertheless advanced with the bird.

Something in her action and look won the child in the carriage at once, for she leaned towards Hepsy with a gentle smile, and taking the pigeon in her daintily gloved little hands, she said: "You have taken care of my bird, I can see. But how came it here?"

Luckily for her presence of mind, Hepsy was so fascinated by the exquisite face which was bent towards her, that she forgot, for the moment, the handsome lady, and carriage and servants. Inspired with courage by the good-will of the sweet smile bestowed upon her,—she told her tale, including her

vain effort to send the pigeon once more on its errand. She sighed, as she ended her story, for she knew that now her favorite must go. But the prancing horses had long to wait, pawing the ground, before the fair girl in the carriage had asked half the questions, or said half the kindly words she wished to say to Hephzibah, who stood enslaved by her beauty and grace, and never wearied of answering, or of telling the adventures of the pigeon in all their minutest particulars.

At length the handsome lady, who had been listening with a pleased smile, interrupted the two young girls. Her voice was sweet and clear as a bell, and even old Dolly, 'who kept respectfully aloof, could hear all she said, though her hearing was none of the sharpest. "We are delaying too long, my little daughter, and I think you must now have asked every possible question of this good girl. Then addressing Hephzibah, she added, "Is that your grandmother, my dear?"

"Oh, no!" said Hepsy, with a loving glance at old Dolly. "But she is my best friend, and oh, so good to me."

"Then this will be for you to get her something useful," the lady continued, leaning over the side of her carriage and putting something in Hepsy's hand, while, with a kind nod to her and to Dolly,

she bade the coachman drive on. But as he put his horses in motion, Hepsy, looking down on what the lady had placed in her little palm, saw it was gold; and she sprang forward eagerly, holding it up. Seeing her action, the coachman again drew his reins, and Hepsy exclaimed, blushing and breathless, "O ma'am, you did not mean this, it is gold!"

"Yes, I did mean it," the lady replied. "My little daughter is in your debt for the care of her bird."

"But it was all pleasure for me," murmured Hepsy, with a downcast and not quite satisfied look. "Then take Mama's present for love of me," cried the lovely little mistress of the pigeon, with a look and tone that made Hepsy sparkle and brighten at once.

The coachman touched the burnished sides of the horses with his whip, and away flashed the "grand show," as Dolly had called it. Three or four minutes more, and nothing at all of it was to be seen. All had vanished like a brilliant dream. Beautiful ladies, and snow-white pigeon, glancing equipage and shining steeds. Not a sign was left, but the gold coin in Hephzibah's hand, contemplating which, she slowly followed Dolly into the hut.

"What is it, Granny?" she asked, as she laid the money on the table. "Why, bless the child, it is

a whole golden sovereign," cried Dolly, surprised into unwonted animation. "And how many shillings then, Granny?" Hepsy gravely continued, with her eyes on the money. "Twenty shillings, my dear." Dolly returned, smiling at the business-like pre-occupation on the child's young face. Hepsy remained mute, plunged, in truth, in profound and abstruse calculation; so profound and prolonged it proved, that the old woman gazed at her in wonder, over her spectacles, though she forbore to interrupt her cogitations.

"Granny!" cried Hepsy, at length, as if relieved by having solved some difficult problem, "When may I go to the town?"

"Why, my dear, you know what we're both of us afraid of; you can't have forgotten Joe and Meg?"

Hepsy shuddered for answer. But all the same she said, "Let me go just this once, Granny, dear?"

"To spend your money, I doubt, lass. You're like the rest of the folk. One would think you feel the gold burn in your pocket, as they say."

But Hepsy persisted, and prevailed; only she was to wait till next market-day, when Dolly felt sure that a farmer, who knew her, and passed that way

to market, would take charge of the child, and bring her safe back at night.

She expected that Hepsy would tell her what she meant to do with the pound, and she waited patiently till the very morning of the eventful day; but Hepsy, on this point, continued dumb. When she was dressed in her humble best, and waiting for the farmer to appear, Dolly at length resolved to touch on the important point.

“Now, Hepsy, my dear, I know you’re a sensible child as can be; but that’s a deal of money for you to manage. Tell me how you are going to spend it, and if you really mean to spend it all.”

“Don’t make me tell, please, Granny,” Hepsy entreated.

“Ah, well, it’s your own; but I doubt, child, you mean to spend the most of it on me, and that will vex me above a bit.”

The child looked brightly up in the old woman’s face. “But you see, Granny, the lady gave it me for that. She said I was to get you something useful with the money. Those were her very own words.”

“Anyway, Hepsy, promise me that you will get a something for yourself as well as me.” And Hepsy promised, as she jumped up eagerly on

descriing the farmer's cart, which before long had rumbled and jolted up to the door.

The farmer, and indeed all the poor people round, knew about Hepsy, and respected old Dolly for giving food and shelter to the child; he had willingly undertaken to convey her to the market town, and even volunteered to return in good time that night for the sake of the child. He now lifted her in and seated her on some sacks on the floor, so that her little face just peered above the side of the cart, and from her post she waved many and many an adieu to Dolly and the goat, and the geese on the common, who all seemed to her special and intimate friends, now she was going, even for a short time, away. She felt sad, indeed, at even this short parting from a home so happy to her, and troubled thoughts of her terrible wanderings with Joe and Meg came across her, in this her first removal from Dolly and the hut; for, except to go to church on Sunday, when Dolly was always with her, she had never yet been out of sight of the common since she found a shelter in the midst of its wild and rough desolation; nor did the farmer's first observation tend much to chase her sorrowful feelings away. He and all the neighbours knew that the tramps who brought the child there, had threatened to look her up and take her away,

"come Christmas," as the country saying is ; so he turned to his little passenger, and said, though with not the slightest intention of disturbing her peace, "You must keep a sharp look out, now Christmas is getting so near, my child, for you don't want to go on the tramp again, I reckon. Now you be grown so neat and tidy like, it would be a sin and a shame, to be sure."

Hepsy turned very pale, and shrank together in the cart, at this speech, and the farmer, sorry for the dismay he had caused, good-naturedly endeavoured to banish all unpleasant ideas by offering some rosy-cheeked apples, which he drew from his ample pockets.

She smiled, consoled by his kind intent, and soon became engrossed in the excitement of new scenes and sights, as they jogged along. The farmer pointed out to her, from time to time, such objects as, in his judgment, might interest and amuse. He showed her the ruined remains of the gibbet where once desperate criminals were hung, and the solitary farm among a line of low hills where a maid-servant murdered her mistress one Sunday morning, when all the rest were at church. Then, turning to more cheerful topics, he paused on a village green, which they were passing through, and explained how the Maypole was dressed in the spring ; and

how the children feasted and danced there all the merry May-day; and how the lords and ladies, so he called the inmates of a noble old castle, which stood on a height above, would come down to see the village sports, and scatter sugar-plums for the young ones to scramble after, and sometimes give presents to the elder ones too.

To all this Hepsy listened with most eager interest, even venturing a timid question herself now and then.

The castle, he said, was called Hawksleigh, and the Lady and her young daughter were as beautiful as ever any ladies could be; he did not believe, indeed, that even the Queen herself and the Princesses up at the Court could beat Lady Hawksleigh, and the little Countess, and he heard others say the same.

Round eyed, and with open lips, Hepsy listened, and would have liked the farmer to begin and tell her all this over again, as soon as he ceased to speak.

She gazed at the towers and battlements of Hawksleigh Castle, as long as they were in sight, and wondered what Lady Hawksleigh and the young Countess could be like. Perhaps, she said to herself, they were like the ladies who took away the pigeon, and gave her the wonderful piece of

gold which was to enable her to go home that night laden with so many treasures.

Fortunately for her unpractised powers of calculation, the farmer had promised to deposit her with a cousin of his, who turned out a motherly friend, and, as Hepsy thought, a perfect paragon of knowledge and skill, so that she was able, in spite of her own inexperience, to lay out her money to real advantage, before this day of wonders was ended, and she was again seated among the farmer's marketings, and on her way back to the common.

It would be far too long to tell of all Hepsy saw, and all she thought about, while she was in the town. Only this one important circumstance can we here find room to record. When all her own business was well accomplished, and she had been regaled by the farmer's cousin upon what she thought a most sumptuous repast, she was allowed to watch from the door all the coming and going in the street outside. It was the principal street in the old market town, and was, Hepsy thought, perfectly thronged with horses and carriages and carts, and people on foot; and she never seemed as if she could tire of watching the shifting crowd. At last, among not a few gay-looking vehicles, what did she espy, turning into the long street with a sweep and a dash, but the very carriage which not

very many days before stood by old Dolly's hut on the common.

On it came, creating a prodigious stir and commotion even on this busy market-day, and within sat two ladies, the very same two, as Hepsy presently knew; that handsome lady, and her lovely little daughter too. The farmer's cousin looked out over Hepsy's head, and observed, as the carriage dashed by, "That be my Lady Hawksleigh, of Hawksleigh Castle, my dear; and the sweet little beauty beside her is her daughter, Lady Jane."

Hepsy, as was her habit, drank in all she heard; but herself spoke not a word. This, then, was what a ladyship was like! She registered the fact in her mind, raising the class of ladyships in general into some very angelic standard indeed.

The day of wonders, like all days, whether wonderful or not, came at last to an end. It was some long time after the street lamps were lighted, when the farmer came in his cart to the door; and as Hepsy sat sleepily in her place on the floor, and the farmer, with many a crack of his whip, left the town behind him, all she had seen seemed to the child mingled up in a many-coloured dream in her mind, and, indeed, most likely many a dream did mix with reality in her busy, but weary, brain.

A rough road, full of deep ruts, roused her with

a series of jolts, which seemed to shake every bone in her little body loose; and she knelt up to ease herself by a change of position, and looked at the stars overhead, across whose bright faces heavy clouds were hurrying fast.

A loud vociferation, from a strong, coarse voice near at hand, called her attention back; and, to her speechless dismay, she plainly saw, under a few bushes by the side of the road, a well-known and dreaded group.

Yes, there was the poor thin donkey browsing by the struggling light of a gipsy fire, which gleamed over his shaggy hide; and there was the iron pot, she had so often been forced to tend, hanging over the horrid flames, which painted yet more horribly than reality itself the faces of Joe and Meg, as they crouched for warmth in its beams. Hepsy shuddered, and hid herself hastily in the cart. The farmer, little suspecting, indeed, who these vagrants were, yet cracked his whip, and made all speed to remove himself from such undesirable neighbours.

It seemed to Hepsy, however, as if in an instant she should be dragged from her hiding-place, and delivered over to misery once more.

But the cart jogged steadily on, and she remained quite unobserved, and when, at last, she ventured a timid glance behind, not an object broke the silence

and darkness, except the wind in a few scattered trees, and the hurrying clouds over head. With a sigh of the deepest relief, she lay down at the bottom of the cart, and stirred no more till she got out at Dolly's door, and heard the old woman and the farmer exchange their friendly greetings, scarcely daring to believe she was really safe there again; nor was she quite herself till the door was shut, and before even she displayed her treasures, she had told old Dolly who it was that had appeared to her in the dark road. To the old woman's gentle soothing she expanded, however, like a flower to the sun.

"God will help us, my lamb," said Dolly, and Hepsy said a thankful "Yes," and turned with a lightened heart to open her parcels, and tell her day's events.

Now, to our young readers, who live in wealthy and well-supplied houses, and who never knew a real need unfulfilled, it will be most likely rather disappointing to hear that the chief articles which Hepsy produced before Dolly's delighted eyes were first a warm dress and a flannel petticoat for Dolly herself. On these, indeed, the bulk of Lady Hawkeleigh's gift had been spent. But there was, besides, a neat piece of print for Hepsy, and a parcel containing some tea and sugar. Altogether Dolly was

more than satisfied that the golden sovereign had been well and judiciously spent ; and ever disposed to attribute all sorts of talents and perfections to her darling Hepsy, it required many repeated disclaimers and explanations from her, before she satisfied herself that Dolly understood how much she really owed to the farmer and to his cousin's kindness and help.

Happy days followed, while the pieces of stuff were converted into their respective garments ; and though a fashionable dressmaker would have smiled contemptuously, neither the old woman nor the child could see a single fault in the joint result of their labours.

Over these hours of thankful industry the remembrance of Joe and Meg still hung always like a dark and threatening shadow. Dolly could not endure that the child should be many minutes out of her sight. Hepsy, indeed, soon came, with the happy confidence of childhood, to be less constantly uneasy than her old friend was for her.

Six weeks or more still intervened between then and Christmas, and Hepsy maintained they must be safe till then ; and that her dreaded tyrants, though recently so near, might wander many a mile away before the time they appointed for their return.

It was almost the end of November, and almost at the closing in of the day, when, as Hepsy drew water from the spring, and was quite engrossed by the task, she felt a light touch on her shoulder. The bucket slid from her grasp, as she looked round in startled amaze. She saw no one, indeed, near, and wondering, nay trembling a little at she knew not what, she continued to gaze around, when a fluttering in the dim air roused quite other feelings. She uttered a cry of joy, and her old favorite, the silver-white pigeon, rested on her shoulder, and pecked at her ear.

Caressing it fondly, Hepsy ran into the cottage and showed Dolly the bird. Under its wing a paper was tied, larger a great deal than the note she found there before. It was shining, thin paper, of a lovely pink, and on the outside Hepsy soon made out these words,—

“To the little girl who took care of this bird.”

Beautifully neat and clean, and easy to read, were these words which were seen inside, when the carefully-folded note was opened and smoothed:—

“I who write, am the owner of the pigeon, and shall always be obliged to you for it. I and Mama have heard all your story from your clergyman, whom Mama knows very well. Mama says she wishes to help to prevent any one from taking you

away; and oh! so do I. So I send you my pigeon, who has now been taught to carry letters, and will, I hope, bring this safe. I and my nurse want to come and see you again. But send off the pigeon to-morrow that we may see if he comes back here safe; and please try and write me a little note. I cannot help thinking, by your face, you can write. My name is Jane, and yours, I know, is Hephzibah, which is a very hard name to spell."

So ran the elegantly-written note, which Hepsy knew, and told Dolly, with a mixture of awe and delight, was written by no less a person than a Countess, for such, she remembered, the lovely Lady Jane was called.

Her own reply was, indeed, a momentous affair. In the first place, it was no easy thing to find a nice bit of paper, and worthy of such a destination. But the writing and spelling! Ah, that was a still more serious matter. However, the desire lent skill enough; for where there's a will there's a way; and at length, before Hepsy laid her head on the pillow, her letter, which ran as follows, lay ready for despatch on the morrow, while the pigeon slept peaceably in its old quarters once more:—

"Hephzibah"—and here we must confess that Lady Jane's own note taught Hepsy first how to spell her name correctly. "Hephzibah is

very, very thankful, and would be more so than ever if Lady Jane comes to see her and Granny again."

She felt much ashamed of her poverty of language and, indeed, had made half a score attempts on her slate, before she resigned herself to let this last one go. But go it did the next day, the pigeon setting off with a steady and business-like flight, which seemed to assert it was, in fact, at last properly educated for the task.

With joy and delight Hepsy watched it now; none of her old heart-ache troubled her as before, when the distant sky blotted it out from her sight. Dolly, it is true, regarded all this as innocent child's play, and put no faith whatever in the pigeon as a messenger of real and trustworthy importance. But she forbore to shake Hepsy's faith, by making any doubtful remark; and the child, on her part, considered herself as perfectly safe, if the beautiful Ladies of Hawksleigh really had resolved to protect her from the terrible Joe and Meg.

Every day she said to herself, "Will they come to-day?" But November went, and December came, and no "Lady Jane" had as yet appeared.

All at once, one snowy morning, when the common lay patched in places with white, and in others bare and brown, while Hepsy brought in wood from

their little store at the back of the hut, she heard voices, and peeping round the corner, saw Dolly talking to a grand man, with a band of gold round his hat, who sat proudly on a splendid horse. Hepsy hung back for a moment, and in that moment the man was gone, and she heard him say, as he put his horse to a trot, "In half an hour or an hour I shall be back."

Running hastily in, Hepsy found the old woman rubbing up her spectacles previous to inspecting a paper which lay on the table before her. It was from no less a person than Lady Hawksleigh herself, and proposed, in the kindest terms, that Dolly, and her little adopted child should spend their Christmas at the Castle. "Then Hephzibah will be out of harm's way," the Lady said, "and you will both have good Christmas cheer. If for any reason you do not like my plan, send me word by the servant who brings this note, for I have promised my little daughter that she shall provide you some Christmas fare, if you do not partake of ours here."

Now, Dolly was of the old, old school, and a Ladyship was to her a very great person, and a very great authority too; and as she and Hepsy made out the words which this great Lady had taken the trouble herself to write, it seemed to the old woman that whatever the latter proposed must be done.

She sighed, however, as she uttered some such view of the case aloud, and Hepsy checked her own exuberant joy at the sound of that sigh.

“Don’t you want to go, Granny, dear?” she anxiously inquired.

“It will be safest for you, my lamb,” was Dolly’s ambiguous reply; but she sighed again as she spoke. Hepsy gravely waited for more, with a tender look of inquiry, to which at length her old friend replied : “It is foolish and selfish, only I *am* foolish, I know. Yes; we had better do as the Lady is so good as to say.”

And Dolly got up in a fidget of nervous unrest, as if she must immediately begin to prepare, she knew not what, for such an overwhelming event, although it wanted yet more than a week to Christmas-day. Hepsy could not bear that the placid calm which she had been always used to see in her old friend, should thus be discomposed, and for her sake too. She could not understand it all one bit, however; for how could any one *not* wish to go to the Castle? And so she felt and looked ready to cry; which Dolly perceiving, was at once herself again. She sat down, and took the child on her knee, endeavouring to put into words feelings which she herself on her own part was scarcely able clearly to define.

"I never were a single Christmas-day in all my life away from here you see, my dear. Not that it matters for that. Of course that be nothing. Only then it seems somehow to me that for an old body like me, poor, and as homely as ever can be, to find myself up there at a grand Castle, and among lots and lots of gentlemen, like him," and she pointed over the common, the way the grand man with the gold band round his hat had galloped across it. "Lots and lots on 'em," she repeated, with dismay increasing at her own picture, "and smart serving-maids in silks and that, and all, very like, making game of me, as is very natural too, for it's quite likely they never saw such a poor old creature among them before."

Hepsy listened to all this, her cheeks flaming scarlet, and her eyes flashing fire, at the conclusion of Dolly's unusually lengthy discourse.

"We will stay at home, Granny, please," said she, when her friend had done. And Dolly was startled quite out of her own train of thought at the look and decided tone of the child. "Nay, nay, never heed what I said, my dear. After all, it don't matter a bit; and it will for certain be safest for you."

"But I had much rather stay here, Granny; come what will we will stay—and—you know you always said God will help us."

“Ay; but, perhaps, this is just the way He is helping my lamb.”

“You shall never go where anyone can laugh at you, if I can help it, my own dear, good, kind Granny,” Hepsy exclaimed, in a burst of excitement.

“There he comes. And now I will tell him myself. I shall say you are too old to go to the Castle, Granny.”

And, without waiting for any further debate, Hepsy flew off over the snow, and stopped breathless by the side of the horse. She gave her answer with what clearness of speech she could muster, and with such words of grateful thanks as her powers could supply. The man nodded his head, struck spurs to his horse, and was gone.

A day or two later Lady Jane and her nurse really did appear; and oh! how surprised were the old woman and the child when they saw all that the fair young Countess had brought.

This time it was not the great coach and four which came prancing up to their door, but an elegant pony-carriage, drawn by two little spirited steeds, whose long, silky tails almost swept the ground. The lovely little lady drove them herself, and the nurse sat by her side, while a dapper little groom, in top-boots and shining buttons, had a little

seat all for himself behind, whence he sprang down like a flash of light, when his young lady drew her reins, and stood at the ponies' heads as long as she talked to the two at the cottage door.

But besides this fairy-looking equipage, there was in attendance, behind, a light spring-cart, and this contained wonders without end; and all these wonders found their way, by hook or by crook, under the roof of the tiny old hut, which had certainly never held such grand things before.

There was a neat deal box quite full of warm and useful clothing; and another equally well filled with tea, and sugar, and rice, and candles and soap, and more such useful things than there is room to set down. And these two boxes were stowed each in a corner, serving as cupboards; for of cupboards there was but one in the cottage, and that held the few cracked old cups and plates. What, then, was Hepsy's delight, when she turned, after helping to place the two boxes safely in their place, to see that the nurse had replaced these cracked old things with a set of the brightest and prettiest crockery that any cottage could have. "And now," said Lady Jane, when the raptures of Dolly and the child subsided sufficiently to enable them to bear new surprise, "now, Nurse, for the Christmas dinner."

And sure enough, all nicely stowed in a hamper,

which was just lifted out of the cart,—they saw a fine large goose, and some splendid mince-pies, and, moreover, some bottles of wine.

“ Bless your sweet face ! ” old Dolly exclaimed, unable to repress her genuine opinion about these last ; “ I never tasted none in all my days, and I dared’nt, least I should be real silly, you know.”

The conclusion of her speech was addressed in a lowered tone to the nurse, who, with an amused smile, assured her that it would certainly do her good to take just a little on Christmas-day, and the rest might be kept as a medicine, if they were ill.

Dolly endeavoured to establish her own view upon this one matter, but in vain. She was over-ruled, and the bottles and hamper, with various other contents, not hitherto named, such as apples, and nuts, and cakes, destined more especially for Hepsy herself, were placed inside with the rest. Lastly, some sacks of coal were deposited by the carter behind the hut, in the little yard where was stored their stock of wood and turf—for coal was another luxury undreamed of before—and which, perhaps, found more favor in Dolly’s eyes, now that age had chilled her vigor, even than the more attractive and splendid gifts already described.

While this scene was going on—Dolly curtsying perpetually, and Hepsy, now laughing, now clapping

her hands, and now almost crying—as busy and as notable as any grown woman, here, there, and everywhere,—her cheeks flushed, and her eyes like two great shining stars,—Lady Jane was looking on with scarcely less delight, and carefully held on her knee all the time a basket containing the pigeon, as she sat in her carriage, with the dapper groom keeping her ponies still.

“Come here, Hepsy, please!” she called out, in her sweet voice, when all was done; and she made the blushing girl get in, and sit in the nurse’s place, by her side, while she thus went on:

“The dear old pigeon can carry quite cleverly now, and it brought your note; and a nice little note it was. But this time the pigeon must spend its Christmas with you; and mind, Hephzibah, and do exactly as I say. I have written on this slip of paper all ready—you see.” And she showed the words — “Please come at once.” “Now,” she resumed, “take care and have this always ready, and the pigeon too, and the instant there seems any danger, you know what I mean, then tie the note in its place and send the bird off. In less than an hour we can send you help. Do you see?”

Hephzibah did see; and her face expressed this, and her gratitude, and her perfect trust in both the

lovely lady and her bird, more plainly than any words could have done, and more eloquently too.

All that day at the cottage on the heath they could do nothing but examine their riches over and over again : and the next day was Christmas-eve.

Great was the cleaning and rubbing bestowed by Dolly and Hepsy on the poor old hut, to make it as worthy as possible of all it contained ; though it was at all times as clean and decent as its poverty would allow. Bright holly and delicate mistletoe were tastefully arranged by the child ; and altogether they hardly believed, after their labours were finished, that this cheerfully-furnished and decorated room was really the same as of old.

Often even in the night, Hephzibah awoke, and tried, through the darkness, to descry the new adornments which she knew were there : and she rejoiced when the first streak of dawn set her lurking fears at rest, and showed her that they were no dream.

Proudly and thankfully Dolly went, holding Hepsy by the hand, both dressed in their handsome new clothes, to attend the service at church the next day ; and, with grateful humility, answered the kindly greetings to her and to Hepsy, when the congregation issued from the porch. Then all went their separate ways, to enjoy their Christmas cheer ;

and Dolly and Hepsy hastened over the common, busied with thoughts of the goose to be roasted, and the luxurious board to be spread.

The fire soon crackled on the hearth, and the goose turned and turned in a knowing manner, just in its warmest glow. Hepsy already had laid out the table; for they could never have enough of gazing on its splendours; and she insisted, moreover, in placing upon it a bottle of wine. There were a dish of mince-pies! plates of apples and nuts and cakes, and, in short, a repast was set out, as the child remarked, quite fit for any prince.

The pigeon fluttered in and out, for the day was not too cold for them to leave the door open, and, indeed, with such unwonted cookerries going on, a little fresh air was by no means amiss.

Hepsy looked all round with a scrutinizing glance;—not an imperfection could she descry anywhere. The goose began to show a delicate tinge of brown. A little more coal would be wanted, however, and, shovel in hand, Hepsy went off to the yard, with the pigeon fluttering round her. Her shovel filled, she was just about to emerge from amongst the wood and the turf, when, far away on the verge of the common, a sight caught her eye, which made her pause, and draw back. A few minutes more and she was only too sure what it

was. If she went into the hut, they would see her, if even they had not seen her now. Still they were not yet near. She hoped she was still unseen. Poor child ! all her joy, all her pride in their Christmas feast, all her happy preparations and brave decorations, passed from her mind, as if such things had never been. She forgot her own neat, warm dress, her little feet strongly shod and protected from cold and wet, and as she knew who was approaching with a slow, but terrible, certainty, once more she felt herself ragged and dirty, cold and half fed ; and, worse than all, daily assailed with curses and blows, in place of kindness and love. All these fearful feelings flashed through her mind in a second, as she stood behind the wood-heap, shivering in her terror. But there came to her remembrance Dolly's oft-repeated words, " God will help us, my lamb ! " Just then the pigeon stooped from its flutterings, and alighted on her shoulder. " He is helping us," thought Hepsy ; and, quick as thought, she had tied the note, which she carried always ready, just as Lady Jane had desired ; threw the pigeon cautiously up in the air, and saw it swiftly sweep round and round and away. At the back of the hut there was a rent in its wooden walls. Hepsy knew this chink well, for she and Dolly often spoke to each other by its means ; and now, without

losing an instant, she called to the old woman, "Granny, Granny, listen!" Her tone, carefully lowered as it was, instantly communicated the alarm to Dolly. "Oh, my child, my child!" she cried back again, "they are sure never coming now."

"But, indeed, they are, Granny. Yet keep up your heart. The pigeon is gone with the note. In less than an hour the dear lady promised us help. I can hide here. Shut the door fast, Granny, dear. They will break it open, I doubt. God keep you from harm. If they hurt a hair of your head, I must come in; and I will."

Dolly heard this long speech without losing a word. She went to the door and made it fast; then to the window, and through it could clearly see, even with her dim sight, that Hepsy was not mistaken. She perceived, however, that the tramps were still beyond the reach of her voice. So she said to the child, "All shall be as you say, my darling, and we will trust in God. But if we had gone to the Castle, this would never have happened; and so this one thing you must promise and do. When they're once inside, as they surely will be at the smell of the food,—mind me, and run for your life. You can hide in the gravel pit, the way they have come. Do you hear me, Hepsy, and will you do this for me?"

The truth was that Dolly perfectly well knew the child would, as she had said, come in, if these savage people were, as was more than likely, rough and brutal to her; and Hepsy, indeed, with this very intention in her mind, at first absolutely refused to go further. But Dolly's self-upbraidings for not having placed her in safety were so heart-rending, that at length her entreaties prevailed.

"Bless you, for a good child," Dolly whispered, for now the sound of the donkey's feet, alternating with Joe's loud voice, might be plainly distinguished outside.

"Make a long round, my lamb, and keep thyself clear of the window and of the door, that thou may not be seen, dost hear?"

Hepsy's faint "yes" was barely audible, for at that moment a loud shouting and battering began at the door.

With presence of mind, inspired by her fears and her love, Dolly paid no heed to this rude summons until she had removed all signs that the feast was laid there for two. Then she called through the door, to know who was there; and hereupon a parley ensued, which she prolonged to the uttermost, knowing well that all depended on gaining time, if, indeed, the pigeon could summon them aid in this their direst and deepest need.

But Joe was not slow to sniff the smell of good cheer, nor to convince himself that none was within who could gainsay his forcing his way to help himself to the best he could find; for the feebleness of age was easily detected in Dolly's replies to his insolent demands; and he only waited till Meg had gone to make sure no human aid could be seen approaching far or near on the heath, when, with one fierce kick, every bolt and latch gave way, and he strode in, master of the place, while Meg stayed behind only to fasten their donkey to a post.

Well was it that Dolly had exacted a promise from Hepsy to fly; for the child could never have borne to hear the scene that ensued.

The feast prepared for her old friend and herself did, indeed, prove important to them in a far stronger sense than if it could have feasted them both a whole year; for it mollified a little the savage pair, and decided them to proceed to no other business until they had eaten and drunken their fill.

Dolly made little opposition to the rough orders she received, but placed the smoking and savoury goose before them, secretly rejoicing that she could propitiate them thus.

"Good wine, by my eyes!" cried Joe, as, extracting the cork with his teeth, he put his nose to the

neck of the bottle, and then filled a tumbler and tossed it off, keeping fast hold of the bottle meanwhile.

Meg submitted until he had disposed in the same way of a second tumbler, and then a fierce altercation ensued, which ended in her receiving sundry blows indeed, but none of the wine.

Dolly turned away sickened ; till Joe and his wife, having eaten as much as they could, ordered her forward to answer their questions, employing themselves the while in packing up all they had left undevoured.

The old woman made no attempt to deny it, when the two tramps told her they knew from the neighbours that Hepsy, or "Bet," as they called her, had found a shelter with her. To her assertion that the child was from home, they poured out most frightful oaths, and declared the old witch told lies.

The discovery of the box of new clothes, and finally, of the tea and more wine, and other good things, diverted the storm for a time, as it was no easy matter so to arrange that they and the donkey should suffice to prevent leaving anything worth having behind. The possession of such a prize, indeed, made them resolve to hasten away, and abandon for the time the search for the child ; though

they swore to come back and murder old Dolly outright, if in a week they did not find "Bet" was ready for them. Then, tying the old woman in her chair, lest she should contrive to summon help, they loaded the donkey and themselves, and set off as fast as they could. But justice was swifter than they. The pigeon had swiftly done its part, and help and punishment both were at hand.

From the gorse on the side of the old gravel pit, the child beheld the departure of the thieves, but her heart leaped with relief to see, at the same moment, a large cavalcade dashing rapidly on from the direction of Hawksleigh Castle.

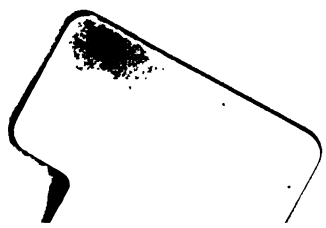
Joe and Meg, it is true, had taken the opposite road, and were hurrying on as fast as they could. They were, however, impeded by the burden of their stolen goods, and, not suspecting their evil deed to be known, they fell an easy prey to their pursuers, and were soon marching back with pinioned arms in charge of the police. But these messengers of justice were not all. A brilliant party, assembled for Christmas at the Castle, had taken horse or carriage on the arrival of the carrier-pigeon to assist in this triumph of good over evil. Lady Hawksleigh was there, and her child, and they lost no time in entering the cottage, where Hepsy, breathless with running, and with heart-rending

grief, was struggling to undo the cruel cord which bound her dear old friend.

And now our story is done: though Christmas-day has but little passed its noon. We need only say further that though Joe and Meg were soon fast in their prison cell, yet no choice was this time given to Dolly or to Hephzibah herself. Both were carried off by their friends, then and there. All their goods were packed up, not forgetting the goat; and if any one wishes to see where they live, they must go to the East Lodge of Hawksleigh Castle; and the little girl with bright golden hair who comes to the gate, they may be sure, is no other than Hephzibah.

In after years other changes and adventures befell her, which some time we may relate to the young readers of this tale.





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